DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 814 EA 018 579

AUTHOR Futrell, Mary Hatwood
TITLE The Black Teacher as Leader.
PUB DATE 16 Nov 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (13th, New York, NY, November 16, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Education; Black Leadership; Black Teachers; Educational Policy; *Educational Quality; Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Federal Aid; Minority Group Children; Nondiscriminatory Education; Relevance (Education); Teacher Improvement

ABSTRACT

Black Americans have historically gained access to political and economic participation in American society through education and have therefore fought continuously for the right to a full education. The current demand for excellence threatens black gains by proposing a system in which quality education is available only to the few through vouchers and tax credits that would support enrollment in private schools while serious reductions in federal support undermine the quality of the public education available to most minority students. An equitable program to enhance educational excellence should involve recruiting talented new teachers, training them effectively, retaining them once they have joined the profession, and encouraging their participation in educational improvement efforts. Education must be made practically relevant, particularly to minority students. Parents must also be drawn in to provide encouragement and support for their children's educational efforts. (PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271814

THE BIACK TEACHER AS IEADER

MARY HAIWOOD FUTRELL
President, National Education Association

NATIONAI AII IANCE OF BIACK SCHOOI EDUCATORS
13th Annual Conference

New York City, N.Y.
November 16, 1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary Haywood Futrell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 018 579

The discussions we are now conducting are uniquely historic. We are meeting in the midst of a period unparalleled in American education. As a nation, America has placed the problems of public education front and center. Americans are focusing their attention on their public schools with an intensity that is unprecedented — unprecedented, that is, except for the intensity of attention that the American Black community has always focused on the education of its youngsters.

For example, back in 1787 the Freedmen of Massachusetts demanded education for their children. In their petition to the state government, the Freedmen wrote:

'' ... we fear (to see) our offspring rising in ignorance in a land of gospel light ... for no other reason than they are Black.''

These parents demanded an education for their children because they knew that without it, the promise of American democracy would remain an unobtainable will o' the wisp.

They demanded an education because they knew that with it, their children could become full participants in — and contributors to — the Great American Experiment.

Those who wanted to deny liberty to Black people knew these things as well.

For example, in the early 1800's a Baltimore slaveowner named Auld caught his wife giving reading lessons to their teen-aged slave. Auld forbade further lessons, warning his wife that ''If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write; and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself.''

Mistress Auld persisted, however, much to the consternation of her husband. His dire prediction proved absolutely accurate.

That young slave was Frederick Douglass.

Douglass grew up to be a leading fighter for liberty and equality, and — by necessity — an educator of his people.

In fact, every great leader of Black Americans — from Turner to King ... every Black American who has achieved greatness — from Carver to Bunche to the Black people of today who have reached the heights of American society ... every one of our leaders and achievers ... by neccessity has been an educator.

And every Black American educator — by necessity — has been a fighter for equality.

I am talking about educators such as Francis Cardozo, such as the often misunderstood Booker T. Washington, such as Charles Johnson and Benjamin May.

And I am talking about Black educators such as you and me and every member of the National Alliance of Black School Educators.

By necessity, we have been, are, and must remain fighters for equality because America has always needed to be pushed and prodded into giving our children and our students the educational opportunities they need to succeed.

In America, for hundreds of years it was a crime to teach Black people. But Black educators just like us set up underground schools. Many were jailed. Many lost their lives. But they won. America established public schools for all.

Then, for almost one hundred years our children were given second-class schooling. Again, we Black educators led the fight. Again, we won. America established equal education as a right guaranteed to all.

By helping win the fight for guaranteed educational equality, we Black educators not only helped our own children, we helped the children of all Americans. We helped establish a system of education that has made the American people the most educated in the world.

Today, once again, we must launch a movement for education. Today, once again, we must fight for quality education for Black children — and all children — in America.

Today, the gains our predecessors helped win could become the foundation for further advances — or they could be undermined.

Today, the educational reform movement that has swept our country is at a fork in the road. It can take the path toward excellence and equity — or it can turn toward the creation of system that educates the few and excludes the rest.

Unfortunately, too many of our state and national leaders seem hell-bent on taking the path toward exclusion.

These leaders are promoting exclusionary education by senselessly slashing funds desperately needed by public schools. And — as if this weren't enough — they are promoting exclusionary education by proposing vouchers and tuition tax credit schemes that would, in effect, divert funds away from public schools that serve the many and would channel these funds into the coffers of private schools that serve an elite few.

And these leaders are promoting exclusionary education by raising graduation requirements without giving schools the resources they need to help children meet the new standards.

I want to be perfectly clear: as an educator I strongly support all efforts to raise graduation requirements. In fact, in my twenty years as a teacher of more than 2,000 students, many of

whom were Black, I have enforced the highest possible academic standards.

And I know that you — who have dedicated your lives to the teaching of students, especially Black and minority students — are doing the same.

For example, by dint of your dedication — in the face of policies that hinder achievement among minority students — you are succeeding in helping black youngsters achieve higher and higher averages on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests.

And you are succeeding in dramatically raising the reading levels of Black and minority students.

I congratulate you on your accomplishments. You are fulfilling the historic dual role of Black educators by being both teachers and leaders.

But you and I alone cannot complete the job of achieving nationwide educational excellence for Black students. The task is just too great.

Here are just two of the facts that illustrate the scope of the problem:

o Despite gains in reading skills among Blacks, the average 17-year old Black student today still reads at the same level as the average 13-year old white student.

o And despite rises in the latest SAT scores, some 2,000 fewer Black students bothered to take the test last year, indicating that fewer Black students intend to go to college.

There is a clear message in these statistics: the gap between the educational achievements of Black students and white students will be closed only if the educational reform movement becomes committed to closing it. If the educational reform movement does not turn its attention to the needs of Black youngsters, these children will be blocked from receiving quality education just as surely as if a segregationist governor were blocking them from entering school.

And there is a clear lesson to be learned from the history of our country: if we as Black educators do not insist that the needs of Black youngsters be addressed, they will not be.

But by fighting to fulfill the educational needs of Black students, we automatically will be fighting to fulfill the educational needs of all students because millions of white, Hispanic and Asian youngsters now face the same tragic burdens that face many Black students.

For example, while it is true that the majority of black youngsters live below the poverty level, it is also true that growing numbers of students in all racial and ethnic groups are plagued by poverty. In fact, fully 50 percent of all high school students today are forced to work to help support themselves and their families.

While it is true that in America's largest cities the dropout rate among Black and Hispanic students is fifty to seventy percent, it is also true that across the nation over 26 percent of all high school students drop out before they graduate.

All groups of students — white, Black and others — are plagued by alarming rates of drug abuse, shocking percentages of teenage pregnancy, frightening levels of crime, and heart-rending numbers of suicides.

And a recent study by the Education Commission of the States concluded that at least 15 percent of all Americans between the ages of 16 and 19 are so ''disconnected'' from society, they will never become productive individuals.

My friends, our educational system is failing to reach these students who have dropped out and these youngsters who have become ''disconnected.''

It is meaningless to demand that our students achieve higher standards unless we also create educational environments that encourage and inspire. Unless we reach our students, we cannot expect our students to reach for excellence. And if we do not reach our students, America and the ideals for which she stands will truly be at risk. If our schools do not continually strive for equity as well as excellence, they will help create an undereducated underclass.

That is why we must join together to block those who would ignore the needs of the growing millions of our youngsters. We, as Black educators, must once again push and prod America toward equity and excellence.

We must do this on behalf of <u>all</u> Americans because more than any other group of Americans, we know <u>how</u> to do it. In fact, many of us have been fighting for equity all our lives.

Fighting for educational equity and excellence in America today means re-examing <u>all</u> our educational policies and procedures. It means re-examing how teachers teach and students learn.

Achieving our goals of excellence and equity means nothing less than the total restructuring of American education.

As the first step toward excellence and equity, we must develop plans for encouraging talented, dynamic young people to become classroom teachers.

We need large numbers of new people coming into our profession, because a teacher shortage of tragic proportions is threatening our schools — and our children's future.

This teacher shortage is also threatening to make minority teachers — especially Black teachers — an endangered species. But our schools desperately need more trained Black and minority teachers. Our minority children need the positive role models that highly skilled minority teachers provide.

Let us declare here and now: we will no longer tolerate the dumping of untrained, uncertified teachers into the classrooms of predominately minority schools. We will no longer sit silently by while an elite, small corps of teachers is trained to teach gifted and talented youngsters while the other students are taught by people who enter the profession merely as a temporary stopover on their way to some other line of work.

Yes, the teaching profession must begin to aggressively recruit the best and the brightest young people this nation has to offer. And before they enter the classroom, we must guarantee these young people the best training the world has to offer. And once

we attract the best and the brightest, we must develop strategies for keeping them.

Today, only half of those who enter teaching remain more than five years. Why do teachers quit?

They quit because they are frustrated by wages that are below professional levels. They quit because they are not getting administrative and community support. And — most important — they quit because they are demoralized by educational policy making procedures that freeze them out.

Ignoring the opinions of classroom teachers puts educational excellence and equity out of reach. Teachers know what must be done to achieve excellence and equity. But they are seldom asked.

Where we teachers are asked — where we teachers are made equal partners in our schools' decision-making procedures — we bring out the best in everyone — teachers, students and administrators alike.

Aside from attracting, training, keeping and empowering dedicated classroom teachers, the fight for educational excellence and equity must aim to guarantee our youngsters a relevant education. Let's face it — most students drop out because they don't see how education will help them in the future.

By a relevant education, I mean an education that helps our children, Black children, to think, to organize, to analyze and synthesize ideas and knowledge.

By a relevant education, I mean an education that helps children understand the relationship between the works of Socrates, Hillel, Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King, an education that helps them appreciate and be moved by the works of Mozart just as they are moved by the music of Michael Jackson.

And by a relevant education, I mean we must guarantee our students an education that will help them understand the world of the future — the world they will live in after we, their teachers, are gone.

We, as Black educators, have a special responsibility to help Black youngsters understand that the world of tomorrow will bring a job market characterized by an amalgam of new professions — professions unheard of today. And these professions will continually change as technology changes.

We have a special responsibility to help Black youngsters understand that only with a good education can they hope to compete and succeed in that job market.

And — most important — we have a special responsibility to give Black students an education that will empower them to break the

chains of racist political and economic policies that now choke them.

How do we start to develop a relevant, empowering education that inspires our students to achieve excellence?

We start by developing educational techniques that cut through the problems and pressures burdening our students. For example, we must develop ways to make students active participants in learning. We must try out variable teaching period lengths instead of standardized 40 or 45 minute sessions. And we must experiment with the use of new technology.

We start by insisting that our schools upgrade the education Black and other minority students receive. For example, we must begin to insist that the academic courses in our schools be desegregated so that more minority and female students can enroll in calculus, physics, French, Advanced Placement English, and other ''advanced'' courses.

And we start down the road toward excellence and equity by developing programs to involve parents in the education of their children, programs that speak to the parents' needs as well as to the needs of their children. We must help parents learn how to teach their youngsters the importance of a good education and to instill in their children the self-confidence and self-control needed to acquire it.

Parents are the primary role models for their children. If parents value educational achievement and effectively communicate this to their children, their children will almost always work to achieve.

We must encourage parents to do simple things such as refusing to give fake excuses for absences, insisting that the television be turned off and the telephone receiver be put on the hook until homework is completed, and setting aside a specific ''study'' table so that youngsters have a place to do homework.

We must encourage parents to work closely with us from the beginning of their children's educational career to the end.

My friends, I have just outlined a program to achieve educational excellence and equity in this country. It includes attracting talented men and women to the teaching profession, keeping them in the profession, and empowering them to be full professionals.

It includes the development of curricula that truly prepare students for the future and the creation of learning atmospheres that inspire creativity and achievement.

And it includes the development of strategies to forge cooperation between classroom teachers and parents.

I know that in order to put this program into motion, we need the support of all sectors of the educational community: teacher-educators, educational administrators, as well as classroom teachers and parents. And to put this program into motion, we need the support of all levels of government: local, state and federal.

Iet's be frank. Our school districts need money if they are to develop programs that keep children in school and that make schools excellent.

And, indeed, state and local governments have been working to provide the resources needed to improve the quality of education in America.

However, this has not been the case with our federal government.

For the past five years, the Reagan Administration has spent its time and energies firing volley after volley at America's public schools.

For the past five years, this Administration has fed our 40 million public school children an anorexic budget which has starved them of the educational excellence and equity they need and deserve.

And for the past five years the Reagan Administration has senselessly slashed funds to higher education, preventing many minority students from entering college.

And after all it has done to block the progress of Black Americans, this Administration has the effrontery, in the words of William Bradford Reynolds, ''to try to make us believe that it has been to the mountaintop, that it is our ally, our friend.''

This Administration has the gall to say it wants to help Black and minority children get a better education.

How? By proposing we set up a voucher system to allow families to use Chapter I funds to send their children to private schools.

Administration officials call their scheme the Equity and Choice Act of 1985 — TEACH.

But I agree with Mike Casserly of the Council of Great City Schools, who said the proposal should be called DOPE — Destruction of Public Education — because that's exactly what its framers designed it to do.

They aim to undermine public schools by destroying the most successful federal education program we have, Chapter One, and by propping up the schools that serve mostly middle- and upper-class Americans.

Whatever you call the voucher proposal, it is a cruel hoax on the poor.

This Administration hasn't been to the mountaintop — it hasn't even been to a hilltop.

If it sincerely desires to help minority and poor families, it would fully fund Chapter One programs so that all of the 11 million children who have been identified as needing them could participate, not just the 45 percent who now do.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is clear to me that we cannot depend on Washington to initiate, on its own, the programs needed to deliver to the American people the quality education they now demand.

It is clear to me that this task is ours.

I believe it is the most important task facing every person in this room.

And I believe that working together, we can do it. We can create a system of public education in America that truly meets the needs of its people.

In the words of Mary McLeod Bethune:

''There is now before us an unparalled opportunity. This is our day! Doors will open everywhere! The floodtide of a new life is coming in.''

And I will add my own words to Mrs. Bethune's:

I believe that as Black educators we owe it to ourselves, to our students, to Black Americans, and to our nation to infuse ''new life'' into the American educational system.

The great Rabbi Hillel asked three questions that have resounded throughout the ages:

One: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? In other words, we must build our own future.

Two: If we are only for ourselves, what are we? That is, building our future means working to benefit all.

And three, the question that most pertains to the urgency of our task of creating nationwide excellent, equitable education: If not now, when?

The time is now, and together we can get the job done.

Our future, and the future of our nation depends on it.